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In Memoriam.

Julia Webster

LESSONS

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BROUGHT FROM

A Mother's Grave:

A SERMON OF REMEMBRANCE,

*Jul
W. L. W.*

PREACHED AT CLEVELAND,

IN THE

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH,

AUGUST 29, 1869.

BY

WILLIAM H. GOODRICH.

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1870.

Julia Webster, second daughter of Noah Webster,
and widow of Chauncey A. Goodrich, died in
New Haven, August 17, 1869, in the Seventy-
seventh year of her age.

A SERMON OF REMEMBRANCE.

II. TIMOTHY, 1: 5.

When I call to remembrance the unfeigned faith that is in thee, which dwelt first in thy grandmother Lois, and thy mother Eunice.

You will allow me to speak, this morning, under the influences of that affliction which has of necessity controlled my thoughts for many days. I do not intend to obtrude on you my private grief, or to attempt any expression of the loss which has come upon me in God's good time. I desire, rather, to record some of the impressions of an event such as many households must meet, and which is suited to instruct, not me or mine only, but all who may be called to lay a mother, ripe with years, in the grave.

The burial of a mother is an event which comes but once to any man. There is no sorrow like that which parts us from her who

gave us being. There are bereavements more crushing and disastrous; but there is no grief so tender and pervading. There is no loss in which so much seems to have gone from us that was inwrought with all our past history. When a father dies we feel that we are thrust forth alone into the world. The guide, the leader, the provider, the counselor, to whom we looked, is gone. We are unsheltered. We are moved forward into the front rank of the generations. When a mother dies it is as if many hearts were lost to us at once. The light of the home is gone out. The center of love to the whole household is scattered. The bond which united all is broken, and the life of the family itself seems loosened and dissolved.

It is with the mother that the household history always has its latest shrine and remembrance. To her, all through the years of growth and change, come the confidences of children, their most sacred anxieties and hopes. The first Christian nurture is always breathed from a mother's lips. It was she who taught the language of prayer, and beneath her yearning supplication we used sometimes to bow

subdued and contrite as she pleaded for us with God. To her are spoken the first earnest struggles and longings of the soul, touched by the spirit of God; and in her ear is breathed the child's trembling hope of sin forgiven. A mother's heart is a treasure-house of memories, and of spiritual events, in which all the household have a sure place and claim. While she lives, the old home, however far we dwell from it, is home for us still. Though most who once were there are scattered, though all or nearly all are taken from earth, yet in her memory, and in her love, the family life abides, and the household meet in spirit in the places that once knew them. When a mother dies, in the fullness of years, the household life passes, with hers, away. We seem to bury a large part of earth in her grave. Life may have a new side. Another household may be rearing. But the past is ended; its history is written; its ties are sundered to know no earthly renewal. This close and sealing up of one great page of life's history is an experience brought home to many of us, in a mother's death, as in no other way.

Have you walked through the chambers of your childhood's home, its last occupant? Have you come from the spot where, as the only survivor, you have laid to rest beneath the ground, the venerable form that linked you with all the family in which you once mingled? Has it been yours to open, with reverent hand, those hidden places where the mementos of a long life have gathered — those locks of hair, cut by a mother from the damp brow of her dead; those faded notes written hurriedly from beside the dying, telling their last words and looks, and messages to the absent; those long folded letters, yellow with years, which she stored away, filled with how many throbbing hopes, and tender revelations, and sweet exchanges of love and gratitude, once so vivid and dear, now lifeless as sere leaves of autumn, yet treasured to the last by a mother's heart? Have you thus walked among the embers of a household's life, and found it your office to take all those memories and bury them out of human sight, since she, their keeper, was buried? Then do you know how much of all that has been most precious in many kindred

lives finds its utter end when a mother at last dies.

This form of sorrow is one which leads us personally to deep heart-searching.

We discover, beside a mother's grave, that all that life now ended has been peculiarly devoted to our individual welfare. We had known this, in some manner, for years, and our gratitude, perhaps, had risen higher the longer we lived and the more of benefit we reaped from her fidelity. But it is not till after a mother is dead, that we pause to see how much we have owed to her love, or how patient and unswerving it was. Then we discover that a whole life has been consecrated to us. From the first pangs which ushered us into being, there has been one heart which has thought, watched, suffered, toiled for us without rest or intermission. Public duties may preoccupy a father and make his love more general and vicarious, but a mother's affection broods over us with a minute incessant providence. Others may have partaken in this care, but it was none the less devotedly ours. We passed perhaps from its immediate presence;

we outgrew its first modes of help; but it only changed its forms. Anxiety, sympathy, prayer, all followed us in a steadfast earnestness, of which we were unconscious, yet which proved indispensable in many an emergency of our life. Meanwhile with every day and year, we have been reaping benefits from a nurture, that once perhaps seemed irksome, and from a fidelity which we did not understand.

More than one of the great men of this nation have in their ripe age, carefully put it on record, that they owed the self-control and steadfast principle by which they rose to honor, directly to a mother's influence, in the critical days of their youth. If any of us were asked what one thing chiefly saved him from waywardness and evil-companionship, and has kept him to this day free from vice, I believe that he would answer "under the grace of God, the reverence or the memory of a mother." Her appeal had power when all other influence failed. Her unspoken wish restrained us. Her purity and love made all that was base abhorrent. Her devotion was felt as a safeguard all along the walks of temptation. We could not wound or

dishonor her. The mere remembrance of such a mother, though dead, has many a time been a man's lifelong protection. And never till she dies do we know how powerfully her life has invested ours to shelter and purify it. It is a day of heart-searching to any man when he buries a true mother out of his sight. Then he sums up the blessing which he has received in her. And though he may be conscious that he discovers her worth only in part, he finds cause enough to wonder at the patience and faithfulness which have been spent on him. It would be strange indeed if some contrite tears should not flow, as he recalls the haste, the ignorance, the willfulness, possibly the disrespect with which that unwavering love has sometimes had to bear. There's many a man of us who would gladly redeem one hour of that lost past, that he might speak some words of tender sorrow for neglect irreparable, or of fuller gratitude for a loving sacrifice, never realized till it was taken from us forever.

It is to be remarked, also, that no evidences of the Christian religion are so convincing as

those which come to us from a Christian mother's life.

Paul recognizes this indirectly in the text, "the unfeigned faith—which dwelt first in thy grandmother Lois, and thy mother Eunice." We know scarce anything of the parentage or ancestry of Timothy beyond what these words tell us: but in that line of descent there was a faith which was its own evidence. There is no faith so unfeigned as that witnessed in one's own mother. If truth can be found anywhere it can be with her. Who ever else might play a part, or impose on us, we know that she would not. A father's faith may be as genuine and may stamp its proofs, in many instances, with as deep an impression. But there is something in the Christian trust of a believing mother which steadily and always proves its own reality. Let any of us live for years in the sheltering love of a Godly woman, sound in judgment, clear in thought, enriched perhaps by a generous culture, but who has at all events put her trust in Jesus. Let us witness her constant resort to divine guidance. Let us feel the power of her life daily fed at the

mercy seat. Let us see the strength and peace with which she meets the calamities which come to every house, and how she is elevated by them into a more serene beauty of spirit. Let us walk with her, perhaps, in declining years, when all the illusions of life are over, and hear from lips which never spoke anything but truth, her testimony to her Savior's daily presence to support and cheer. Let us see with what meekness she waits, in the last fluttering pulses of a sinking frame, for the hour of her release; and with what solemn joy she goes to be with Christ, which is far better. Believe me, it is thenceforth impossible to doubt that Christ and his salvation are realities. There is something in a faith thus seen, thus enacted in the sincere constancy of a daily household life which cannot be gainsayed. Reason cannot conceive it to be a delusion. There is a depth in it which goes beyond all our questions. It is faith unfeigned. We know it. We reverence it. We are sure that it has alliance with heaven. Perhaps we covet it ourselves. We may dally with the skeptical surmises of the day and bewilder ourselves

with criticism and philosophies as they discuss doctrine, history, and inspiration. But when we witness or remember such faith unfeigned of a Christian mother, that fact dissolves all our fabric of unbelief. Whatever we cannot credit or cannot understand, we know that that life, built on personal trust in the Son of God, is a reality, and that it takes sure hold on the world unseen. For myself, I have had, both in a father's and a mother's life, such palpable proof of the truth of Christianity as all the contradiction of a world could never rob me of; and such persuasion also of the beauty and preciousness of the Christian faith, that I must lose memory and consciousness, before any other good can appear as great. And when I say this, I speak the experience of others also. God has ordained that the religion of Christ shall come home to very many of us in these living forms, so clearly, that no ignorance, no heresy, no false reason shall ever destroy our conviction that it is true. There are some, no doubt, who will reject even such evidence, but they believe it none the less. There are those who with living epistles

in their own dwellings, which they daily read, will still tamper with things unrevealed and wrest the scriptures to their own destruction ; but they still know and in their deeper heart are fully convinced that Christianity is true. They have seen it too nearly, they have walked with it too closely even really to disbelieve. If, in willfulness, they resist this crowning evidence of it, perhaps in a mother's life, it will rise up at last, a silent, sorrowful witness against them in the judgment.

We should omit one of the chief lessons brought us in an aged mother's death if we failed to note the slow ripening of Christian character which crowns her last days with almost unearthly grace.

The finest fruitage of Christian age is apt to be witnessed only by the household in which it dwells. The old must usually live apart from general society. Life can be made tolerable to them only as it is sheltered, and free from social obligations and surprises. It is in the happy confidence of such retirement that God's children, spared to length of days, show

the full fruition of his grace. There is no sight on earth more striking or beautiful than that of an old disciple, standing, like a shock of corn, fully ripe and waiting for the reaper. It is a sight not comprehended at a glance. A mere visitor cannot read such a character. But when you dwell in the society of such a one you see unfolded the finished work of God's husbandry. Nothing but grace, and that working through long years, could bring forth this ripeness and completeness of character. Language cannot portray it. The prominences of native disposition have softened into harmony. The early faults have disappeared. Seventy years of familiarity with Christian truth! Seventy years of daily worship! More than three score years of conscious trust in the Savior, and humble endeavor to do his will! years chequered with mercy and discipline! years filled with urgent responsibilities, all accepted as duty to the Lord; years, through every one of which the believer has been led as a child by the Spirit of God; should not these show some signal changes, some crowning fruits? Does the great Husbandman tend

and prune his plants in vain? Through all these years his grace has been at work to will and to do, strengthening, purifying, transforming, till the loveliness which in youth adorned the form and feature, has passed deep into the soul, purged, elevated, sanctified and shining with spiritual beauty. This it is to be changed from glory into glory even as by the Spirit of the Lord.

There are lives, sometimes, which seem to hover beside us rather than to dwell on our level. They are with us in our society, our sympathies, our duties, our worship. They are never uninterested in our events. But they seem to have risen out of our temptations, out of our fears, out of our conflicts. They linger lovingly with us and with earth; but when they are called to depart, they rise and go with gladness, for they have been made meet already, in everything save the glorified body, for the nobler company of the saints in light.

We are reminded in the circumstances of this sorrow, that many chief lessons of the Christian life are taught best, if not only, in the courses of household piety.

The Christian family is the simplest church. It is the place where all religious teaching is most plain, sincere and thorough. It is the teaching, not of words or formulas, but of daily acts and examples. Take, for instance, self-denial. The family is, of necessity, a school of mutual sacrifice, and the Christian mother, at its head, can, by her simple life of sacrifice, train her whole household to an instinctive habit of self-surrender, nowhere else to be so well acquired. There, in the material of the household, in the diversities of age, in the interdependencies of sex and of relationship, in the varying degrees of growth and capacity, are found the hourly occasions which best bring out the true beauty of a loving self-abnegation. One Christ-like heart in any house will make all the rest feel the attraction of that spirit which looks not upon its own things but also on the things of others. And if that heart be a mother's it will communicate its own grace to children, and will, by grace divine, mould them unconsciously to a thorough unselfishness, which no other training could have wrought.

Take the grace of Christian hospitality—the entertainment of Christ's servants for his sake, the welcoming of friends as his friends also, the thoughtful regard of strangers in the community, the comfort of His poor in their wayfaring and sorrow. This is a duty made very prominent both by Christ and his apostles, much practiced in the early Church, and I am afraid too much neglected by many of His disciples in these days. And this is a household duty. It must be exercised in ones own dwelling. It must be shared in by all the family. No one who has not lived beneath a roof where a generous Christian hospitality has been the law of the house, can understand how rich the blessing which attends its exercise, or how often, with a guest received in the name of the Master, Jesus himself has come in and left his benediction. Of no grace is it more true that "there is that scattereth and yet increaseth, and there is that withholdeth more than is meet and tendeth to poverty." It is one thing to give entertainments as a tribute to society; it is quite another to make the friends of Christ welcome for His sake. It is one

thing to fill our dwellings, when we please, with those whose accomplishments or endearments make their company a delight; it is another to receive the sorrowing, the orphaned, the sick, the tempted, and render them succor in the name of the Lord. It is the prerogative of a Christian mother to hallow her dwelling and train her children to this noble and Christ-like use of hospitality. Home is the spot in which to learn that grace. It is one end for which homes are given, that something of that peace and comfort which there reside, may overflow on the wayfarer and bless the homeless.

Among the qualifications by which Paul designates a "widow indeed," both for maintenance and service in the Church, are these. She should be "three score years old, well reported of for good works; if she have brought up children; if she have lodged strangers; if she have washed the saints' feet; if she have relieved the afflicted; if she have diligently followed every good work." As I read these specifications, I think how fully she, whom I have just laid in a widow's grave, fulfilled

them all. Not the saints' feet only but sinners' feet also hath she washed for Christ's sake; and I cannot recall the period in childhood at which I was not trained to wait upon the stranger and the guest, and bear a portion to the needy.

We ought not to fail, in this connection, to notice how powerful is the contagion of all Christian influence in the household, and that through successive generations.

Families possess and perpetuate their own types of piety. Godly parents transmit, not irresistibly, but by a strong affinity, their best qualities. Prayers and consecrations and covenants become an inheritance to children's children, even as God has promised. I am speaking of what God's grace has done for my kindred, and I will, therefore, say that I am not surprised when I see that almost the entire generation, which is now nearly passed away, and at least three-fourths of their descendants, have become decided followers of Christ; for I know that the head of that household was wont to intercede with God every

day for his children and his children's children, naming each by name, at the throne of grace, until an old man of past four score years, his prayers were ended. And this man did not himself believe in Christ until he was fifty years of age. Let me tell you the manner of his conversion. I speak of Noah Webster, my maternal grandfather. He came of a pious stock, and was a child of prayer, but being of an independent spirit, and disposed to intermeddle with all learning, he grew up averse to the doctrinal formulas of the day; and though never a disbeliever in the Scriptures, and constant in worship, he withheld himself from any personal faith in Christ. His wife was a humble and prayerful Christian. At the time of which I speak his family consisted of two daughters, the older of sixteen years, the younger of fourteen, and some infant children. His Pastor, in the old Center Church, of New Haven, was Moses Stuart, then a young and fervid preacher of the new theology. Those plain, earnest ministrations of the Word were stirring the community to its depths. The spirit of God was applying the truth to men's

consciences, and numbers among that people were being convinced of sin and brought to the Savior. The two daughters of Mr. Webster became deeply concerned for their own salvation. Their distress of mind was evident. A decided man, he wrote a note to Mr. Stuart, courteously but positively prohibiting him from conversing further with them on the subject of religion, and intimating that they needed, in his judgment, no such change of character as Mr. Stuart urged, and were all that, as their father, he desired them to be. The elder he sent out of the city to visit friends, as a means of diverting her mind; but God graciously led her to himself during her absence. The younger daughter, my mother, remained at home, and within a week found peace in Christ, unhelped save by His word and grace. The change wrought in her, and manifested in her very air and manner, in the serene gladness of her life, and her tender assiduity of love toward her parents, struck the father to his heart. He was too candid a man not to own a fact when he saw it. Trouble seized upon him also, as he felt the reality of a change he never had

experienced, a change clearly wrought by divine grace. For days he shut himself in his study with his Bible, and gave himself honestly to know what that taught him of his condition before God. At last he sent for Mr. Stuart and unburdened his whole mind to him as a sinner without excuse. He soon found peace in believing, and not long after, with his daughters, he joyfully confessed Christ in his Church. At the age of eighty-four he died giving this testimony: "I have not one wavering doubt or fear. I know whom I have believed, and am persuaded that he is able to keep that which I have committed to Him till that day."

It is in this heritage of faith and prayer that I give thanks to God in the presence of His people. Amid these recollections, I set up this stone of remembrance. What can any of us do so valuable for those whom we hold dear as to build for them a Christian household? What inheritance so precious as that founded in the faith and hope of God's children? What influences in the Christian life, and in the Church of God, so far-reaching as those which have their seat in homes where

all hearts feel the constraint of supreme love to Christ; where intercessions descend through a long line of holy ancestry; where a child's grace may win a lingering father's heart; and where a mother's and grandmother's faith unfeigned may reappear in children also. If it is sorrowful to witness the close of a family history, and see expire the last life that dwelt in the old home; it is blessed to know that all, in that dwelling, which has been wrought for Christ, will live and widen till the day of God.

May I not speak to you, with the frankness which your love warrants and will not misinterpret, and say, that I have come from this bereavement laden with more of thankfulness than of sorrow. The gain of a Christian parentage, garnered in heaven, far outweighs the present loss. It seems a great thing won, to know such lives finished and in glory. Nor does it minister one whit to self congratulation: for this building of a Christian character, in material so choice and shape so perfect, is clearly a building through God's grace alone. When, again, I go to the graveyard where my

kindred lie, I shall see two stones of remembrance, side by side, covering those forms most dear and venerable of any which this earth holds to me. On the one was graven nearly ten years since, as the sole epitaph, beneath my father's name,

NOT SLOTHFUL IN BUSINESS:
FERVENT IN SPIRIT:
SERVING THE LORD:

On the other will follow the completed text,

REJOICING IN HOPE;
PATIENT IN TRIBULATION;
CONTINUING INSTANT IN PRAYER;
DISTRIBUTING TO THE NECESSITY OF SAINTS;
GIVEN TO HOSPITALITY.

And when I know that every passing reader who was conversant with those who slumber there, will say, that, in those words of Paul, both lives are perfectly described; I know also that it will be a testimony not to the praise of man, but to the indwelling grace of Christ.

And now, if I have dwelt too long on interests and memories of my own, let me say, that I believe that all which I have here recorded

has been true of many households besides that in which I was reared. I have seen other homes as Christian, I have known other parents as faithful, as mine. I count not my privilege to have been extreme or rare. All was the gift and grace of that God who is more willing to bestow his Spirit on them that ask him, than are we to give our children bread. I am sure that the same grace and promise which made my heritage so precious, are free to every household of my flock. Is there a mother among you tempted to disheartenment, conscious of inexperience, burdened with incessant care for souls tender and forming for this life and the life to come, beneath your hand? There is no need of despondency. You are not to bear your burden alone. You have simply to walk in daily trust and patience and God will bless you and your house. He is doing more in you and for you than you know. Though precept seems vain, correction fruitless, example wasted, and prayer unheard, God's promises are sure. He has not forgotten one cry of your heart. He has grace in store for you if you but wait on him with faith

unfeigned. It takes a long life to fulfill a mother's work. You may wait till even-time before you see the light you seek. You may die without beholding the blessing you have implored. But no fidelity, no prayer of yours is vain. There are children yet to be won to God in answer to a mother's supplications, long silent in death. There are those now wandering in sin, and to all appearance, without one thought of duty or of heaven, at whose hearts a mother's words are knocking every day, and whose solitary hours are witnesses, how strong the strife of conscience and of the Spirit to draw back an erring soul to God.



